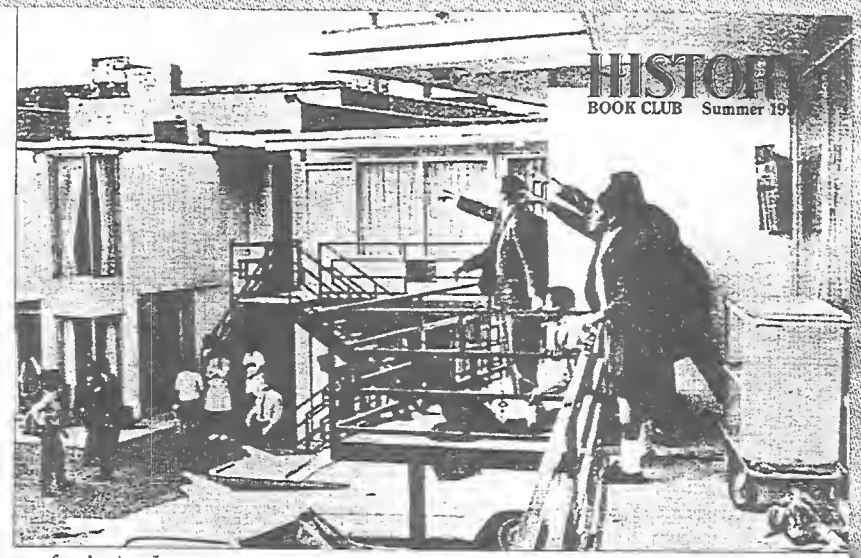
HISTORY BOOK CLUB Summer 19

KILLING THE DREAM

James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.

BY GERALD POSNER



Standing over their fallen comrade, King's aides and friends point in the direction from which the shot had been fired, April 4, 1968 (House Select Committee on Assassinations).

On April 4, 1968, on the balcony of a cheap Memphis hotel, a bullet ended the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. After a 65-day manhunt, James Earl Ray was arrested for the crime. He confessed almost immediately. Then a few hours later he was telling anyone who would listen that he was innocent of the murder and his confession had been coerced.

Ray, in his graduation photo from the International School of Bartending, taken a month before the assassination (FBI).

Thirty years later, the controversy over who killed Martin Luther King, Jr., has gained new life with the recent publication of a book by Ray's current attorney, William F. Pepper, in which he accuses the army of sending a Special Forces unit to assassinate the civil rights leader. Speaking for his family, Dr. King's son Dexter has stated publicly his family's faith in James Earl Ray's innocence. The Kings now believe that their husband and father was gunned down as part of a vast government conspiracy. Adding grist to this mill is the rumor that the filmmaker Oliver Stone may make a JFK-style film about the King assassination.

In *Case Closed*, author Gerald Posner debunked the myths, distortions, and fabrications that surrounded the John F. Kennedy assassination. Now, in *Killing the Dream*, he conducts a full-scale, in-depth investigation into the slaying of Dr. King.

Meticulously dissecting fact from fiction, he sheds new light on the crucial points of the assassination. He explains which eyewitness accounts are reliable and which are not. He punches holes in Ray's own version of the event (which has changed several times over the years). And he pays particular attention to Ray's movements the year he is supposed to have acted under the direction of a man Ray calls "Raoul." But perhaps the most fascinating part of the book is Posner's portrait of Ray himself.

A century of criminals

James Earl Ray was born on March 10, 1928, in a two-room basement apartment just a few doors down from the largest whorehouse in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the rough blue-collar town of Alton, Illinois. On his father's side, he was descended from an unbroken line of liars, thieves, and killers going back nearly 100 years. Ray's own father —a man of at least a dozen aliases—once expressed his admiration for felons: "The fella that holds up a bank ... is trying to make something of himself."

When Ray was six years old, the family moved to a farm in Ewing, Missouri, a barren corner of the state where some of the poorest people in the country tried to scratch a living out of the infertile soil. When the Rays arrived in town, Ewing had no paved streets, no sewer system, no doctor, no bank, no library, no movie house. Only two houses in town had electricity and indoor flush toilets. And out of the 12,000 residents of the surrounding county, only 38 people earned enough money in a year to file income tax returns. Posner notes that the county was a perfect breeding ground for the Ku Klux Klan, which flourished there in the 1920s and 1930s.

When Ray was 15, he fell under the influence of his Uncle Earl, who began taking the boy along on nightly tours of Quincy's bars and bordellos. Ray made his first foray into a life of crime at a Quincy whorehouse, stealing wallets while the johns were busy with the prostitutes.

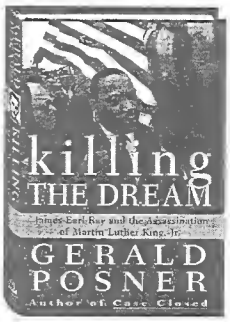
The King family for the defense

Why do Dr. King's widow and children believe that he was gunned down by government agents rather than a racist career criminal? Apparently they were convinced by the arguments detailed in a book published by Ray's latest attorney, William Pepper. One by one, Posner reveals that Pepper's charges are far from the truth. In fact, when the television newsmagazine *Turning Point* was planning to run a segment on the King assassination, reporters for ABC uncovered a host of errors that undermined Pepper's assertion that a U.S. Army sniper unit had been detailed to assassinate King. Yet in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, Dexter King, speaking for his mother, Coretta, his brother, Martin III, and his sisters, Yolanda and Bernice, assured Forrest Sawyer that Martin Luther King, Jr., had been murdered by a government cabal that included army intelligence, the FBI, the CIA, and President Lyndon B. Johnson.

Posner contends that the facts uncovered by ABC did not dissuade the King family. Rather, it proved to them just how vast the conspiracy is.

Killing the Dream balances the gravity of its subject with the excitement of investigative reporting. It is a responsible, forcefully argued examination of what really happened in Memphis on April 4, 1968. No future historian of Dr. King's life and work will be able to ignore it.

About the Author: GERALD POSNER, a former Wall Street lawyer, is the author of the best-selling *Case Closed*, which reexamined the JFK assassination.



446 pages • 6⅛" x 9¼" black-and-white photographs • notes bibliography • index (Random House, $25.00)

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